DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 293 363 FL 017 340

AUTHOR Billmyer, Kristine; Micheau, Cheri
TITLE Discourse Strategies for Foreign MBA Students: A Sociolinguistic Description of the Case Discussion.
PUB DATE May 87
NOTE 14p.; In: Languages and Communication for World Business and the Professions. Conference Proceedings; see FL 017 281.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Body Language; *Business Administration Education; *Business Communication; *Case Studies; English (Second Language); *English for Special Purposes; *Foreign Students; *Graduate Students; Higher Education; Learning Strategies; Persuasive Discourse; Role Playing; Second Language Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *University of Pennsylvania

ABSTRACT

A study was undertaken at the University of Pennsylvania's Joseph Lauder Institute to assess the usefulness and requirements of case discussion for teaching English to foreign graduate students of business administration. The case method of analyzing and solving simulated business problems was chosen because it: (1) is one of the most common formats for information presentation and discussion found in graduate business schools; (2) requires active student participation; and (3) provides a unique opportunity for future managers to practice skills they will need as decision-makers. The study examined several aspects of the technique as a language-teaching tool in this context. First, rules governing verbal, nonverbal, and cognitive behaviors exhibited by students were identified and the behaviors that combine to make the case discussion a unique speech event were examined. Second, a descriptive model of the communicative competence of successful participants was constructed using various linguistic, sociolinguistic, and extralinguistic variables. Third, the analysis was used to design a curriculum for foreign students. The study used an ethnographic approach. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

965

ED293363

DISCOURSE STRATEGIES FOR FOREIGN MBA STUDENTS: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC DESCRIPTION OF THE CASE DISCUSSION

by

Kristine Billmyer and Cheri Micheau
University of Pennsylvania

Presented at the Sixth Annual Conference on Languages
and Communication for World Business and the Professions
sponsored by Eastern Michigan University
Ann Arbor, Michigan, May 7-9, 1987

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

G. Voght

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

FL017340

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

DISCOURSE STRATEGIES FOR FOREIGN MBA STUDENTS:

A SOCIOLINGUISTIC DESCRIPTION OF THE CASE DISCUSSION

Kristine Billmyer and Cheri Micheau
University of Pennsylvania

Introduction

As English teachers of foreign graduate students at the Lauder Institute of Management and International Studies, we have over the past four years sought to improve the design of the English language curriculum in an effort to make course content and methods as relevant as possible to the current academic and future professional needs of our students. To inform this effort we conducted a classroom-centered research project which is the subject of this paper. The focus of the research project is the well-known case method of analyzing and solving simulated business problems in graduate business schools. In particular we were interested in the in-class discussion of the case and the requirements for oral participation by students in case courses.

We chose the case discussion for several reasons. First, we felt it deserved attention because of its ubiquity. The case method is one of the most frequent formats of information presentation and discussion found in graduate business schools. Second, unlike lecture-style classes, case courses require participation from all students on a regular basis. Student participation is usually graded and can form anywhere from 10% to 50% of the student's grade. And finally, because of its nature the case discussion provides a unique opportunity for students while still in graduate

school to practice the skills they will need as future managers and decision makers These include teasing out relevant facts of a problem analyzing and synthesizing information from many sources challenging and defending assertions and negotiating decisions In their roles as corporate leaders they will also need to cooperatively build a solution to a problem with a group of peers and superiors while still maintaining their own agenda

Our specific purposes for studying the case discussion were threefold first to identify the rules which govern the verbal, non-verbal, and cognitive behaviors exhibited by members of the case class and to make explicit those characteristics which combine to give the case discussion its identity as a unique speech event second, to build a descriptive model of the communicative competence of successful participants in case discussions in terms of various linguistic, sociolinguistic and extralinguistic variables and third, to use our analysis as a point of departure in planning the curriculum for a preparatory course for our foreign students at the Lauder Institute

The study is set both theoretically and methodologically within the framework of the ethnography of communication as conceptualized by Hymes (1986 [1972]) and adapted for classroom studies by Mehan (1984) The basic concept of Hymes' theory is the notion of communicative competence, which includes both the innate knowledge of the norms of language use within the speech community and features of performance--knowing when to speak, when not to, what to talk about with whom when, where and in what manner To uncover these tacit rules of speaking and previously unnoticed norms for classroom behavior, we used an ethnographic method as set out by Mehan (1984) Through ethnography it is possible to generate a sociolinguistic description which a) identifies the rules of speaking which underlie the systematicity in language use in various phases of the case discussion and b) enumerates what students need to know to be successful participants in their classroom community

Method

To collect data for this investigation we observed seven case discussions and later interviewed students and professors at the Wharton School of Business Five different professors were observed in the following courses Business Policy Marketing Management Marketing Research and Strategic Planning and Control The number of students in each class ranged from approximately 40 to 60 students Two of the seven classes were videotaped all were audiotaped During each class one or both reasearchers were present as non-participant observers taking notes on the interaction the setting the format of the case discussion and other details about the professor's style and students' behavior Later addditional information was obtained through informal interviews with each of the professors and several randomly selected students (both native and non-native speakers of English) in each of the classes The interviews gave us further insight into such topics as teacher expectations the value placed on participation in the case class the purpose of the case analysis and preferred styles of interaction in the case discussion These interviews also helped us to confirm or disconfirm our own interpretations of the data

Analysis of the field notes and the video- and audiotapes of each of the case discussions along with information from the interviews helped us to identify relevant categories and generate a framework for understanding the rules of speaking which operate in the discussion of a case After relevant segments of the tapes were identified we transcribed them for more detailed analysis

Findings

The results of this study will be described in the following way First we will point out the defining characteristics of the case discussion in other words those features which appeared consistently in the cases we observed and which give the case discussion its unique identity as a particular speech event Second we will try to describe those features of student behavior thought by both American students and professors to be highly desirable for competent membership in the Wharton Business School speech community Finally we will list five areas in which the professor s individual style and personality cause variation in both format of the case discussion and teacher expectations for the students

A. The case discussion as a speech event

The speech event under study the case discussion can be defined as a teacher-directed student-centered classroom activity based on a prepared written case and aimed at cooperatively reaching a solution to the problem outlined in the case Several features distinguish the case discussion as a particular kind of speech event These include major structural components regulation and pace of participation the sequencing of discourse and patterns of turn taking

In terms of overall structure and organization there appear to be three identifiable macro-components of the case discussion The first takes place outside of the classroom that is the assigned reading and sometimes written analysis of a formal case study prior to the class discussion In the classroom two other components were identified The most prominent is the lengthy teacher-led series of questions and answers which both test the students' understanding of the problem and their ability to bring theory and information from other sources to bear on finding a solution to the problem This component is usually subdivided into the summary of case facts and then the analysis and normally accounts for two-thirds to three-fourths of the time spent in the case discussion The other identifiable segment of the case is the lecture segment placed either at the beginning or the end of the class During this segment the professor relates the findings of the case to theory and other issues discusses the feasibility of solutions proposed by students during the discussion and teaches important terminology The length and position of the lecture component of the case classes we observed varied from professor to professor, for example, two of the professors lectured at the end, one at the beginning, and one interspersed mini-lectures throughout the case discussion Nonetheless, the lecture was a regular feature of all case discussions

In terms of the regulation of participation, the case discussion is primarily a teacher-directed, though not necessarily teacher-centered activity As such it is the teacher who initiates most of the topics through a series of general and follow-up questions which probe the students understanding of the case Students have some control over the regulation of turn taking in the sense that while the professor is asking a question they bid for a turn to reply by raising their hands While pre-emptive self-selection also occurs in every case discussion it constitutes the minority of instances of turn taking Competitive bidding was observed in most of the classses, leading us to characterize the case discussion as one of high involvement and high participation through an orderly exchange of turns regulated by the

professor The timing and pace of the exchange in the cases we observed seemed to vary as a function of the complexity of the case In relatively straightforward cases students did not even wait for the professor to finish formulating his question before they began bidding In such cases there was practically no wait-time between the question and the reply allowing for a great many exchanges to take place in a 90-minute class In more technical, complex cases the professor often reformulated his question several times before he was able to elicit a reply This slowed the pace down considerably

Generalizing from the cases we observed the discourse sequences included several typical elements in this order topic initiation through a question asked by the teacher, non-verbal bidding by several students, teacher nomination of a student to reply, and a follow-up question asked by the teacher. Variations in this sequence included chaining replies that is several student bids nominations and subsequent replies to a single question posed by the teacher The sequence was frequently terminated by the teacher giving a summary of the prior discourse and then framing the next topic Example 1 illustrates this typical chaining sequence

Example 1

T phrases a general question
Ss bid (non-verbal hand raising)
T nominates (non-verbally---pointing to S)
S_1 responds
T asks follow-up question
S_1 replies
Ss bid (non-verbally)
T nominates S_2
S_2 replies
T comments (paraphrase)
Ss bid
T nominates
S_3 comments
T asks what the implications are
Same sequence repeated with other students
T summarizes and frames next topic

In the above sequence the students are responding primarily to the teacher, but at the same time have incorporated information and comments from other students into their own responses In this way the sequence while it is teacher-directed, is not necessarily teacher-centered

Another typical sequence we observed was classified as student-centered and minimally teacher-directed In this example the teachers engaged students in discussion with each other Two different teachers accomplished this each using a completely different technique One professor employed role-play and asked various students to take the parts of key figures in the case in order to bring out the issues under consideration The other professor set up debates between students initially asking one student to comment on the opinion of a student who had just spoken, and later simply serving as a moderator, parsing out turns through non-verbal signals This sequence is illustrated in Example 2

Example 2

S_1 Gives opinion

T (looking at S_2) Do you buy that Julie?

S_2 comments (disagrees)

T (points to S_1)

S_1 replies (gives justification)

T (points to S_2)

S_2 responds again

etc

B. Skills necessary for successful participation

The skills which will be described next are those which are highly valued by both students and faculty of the Wharton School and considered essential for successful participation in the case discussion They include linguistic extralinguistic and cognitive skills

1 **Preparation of the case** All of the Wharton professors observed and interviewed cited thorough preparation of the case before the discussion as one of the most important criteria for success in the case course Basically three types of preparation are necessary The first is to be fully in control of the facts of the case This attention to both main idea and detail is essential as factual recall questions are frequently asked throughout the discussion The second type of preparation is to analyze the facts and synthesize information not only from the case, but also from other experience and theory Again, this should be done prior to the case discussion In addition, students need to have formulated several possible analyses of the problem not just one, so that if one analysis is not selected during the discussion students will have the flexibility to adapt their analyses

2 **Clarity and conciseness of language** All professors stressed the need for conciseness and lack of ambiguity since these qualities are essential for the students' future roles as managers The desirability of these language skills was frequently reflected in the professors' questions which were aimed at getting the students to clarify their utterances and rephrase their comments In the following exchange, the professor is trying to encourage the student to replace the incorrectly used word "pricing" and select a more precise term

Example 3

S then they might start to do a little bit of *pricing* But I don't think the
T //but
S //most neophytes
T //they're going to do a little bit of what?
S They re going to do a little they're going to do a little more *research*

Often the professors themselves modeled the appropriate phrasing or attempted to overtly introduce terminology which they felt was needed for the more precise expression of meaning

3 **Ability to respond appropriately to a variety of questions and directives** The questions and directives used by the professors serve a variety of functions and require that students report factual information, as well as defend

assertions explain justify give a rationale challenge or support others' statements and rephrase and clarify their own The ability to do this successfully derives both from prior preparation of the case as well as from attentive listening to and critical assessment of the professor s and other students' comments as the case discussion unfolds The particular techniques used by most of the professors in each case discussion we observed made it quite obvious to both the naive observer as well as the informed participant that students were responsible for defending each assertion they made Frequently professors would ask several follow-up questions of a student just to make sure that he or she had his/her facts assembled and could defend the particular position against new information One professor we observed made regular use of a rather extreme form of this format which we labeled the "hot seat" In the following example the professor grills a student about some case facts

Example 4

T Where's the "r" come from this retention factor?

S It came from NASA from something

T (incredulously) **N A S A** said it's 8?

S I have no idea quite what it was it came from but it (the case) said it came from NASA

T (jokingly) It came from **N A S A**? I can't believe you believe that? (laughs with rest of class) I can't believe you believe that

S With the NASA ads

T Oh with the NASA ads But why'd they come up with the number 8?

S Frankly I've got no idea I assume it's from creative studies that they had seen done to see one period later how many people had remembered those ads

While this particular style was certainly the most aggressive we observed other professors employed similar though more moderate forms of interrogation

4 **Understanding and abiding by the rules of turn taking** As stated previously the case disucssion consists largely of a teacher-directed question and answer format in which the teacher usually nominates students to speak At the same time students are graded on the quality and quantity of their oral participation In such a setting understanding the intricate rules for turn taking and getting and holding the floor is essential

Students aware of the norms of speaking in the case discussion use three primary techniques for getting turns to speak The most frequent method is bidding(raising the hand) and waiting for the professor to nominate a student, either by non-verbal gesture or calling by name Successful bidding techniques include bidding while the teacher is completing the last few words of his question or giving pre-bidding signals such as leaning forward or trying to catch the professor s attention through eye contact Less frequently individual students self-select or the entire group replies in unison without any formal bidding procedure In general, students have a certain amount of control in deciding whether or not to participate in the interaction In one class we observed however the professor used a coercive nominating technique which we refer to as cold-calling This left students vulnerable to being called upon to perform at almost any given moment regardless of their degree of preparedness to handle the question It is also of interest to discover that on rare occasions student-student interaction--unsolicited by the professor--is also acceptable

Since the case discussion is a high-involvement activity in which ideally as many students as possible should have the opportunity to participate, limiting the length of the student s turn also seemed an important feature. In large classes it seems to be the norm that successful students limit the length of their turns by being concise, avoiding repetition of others' comments, and staying strictly on topic

In terms of the particular difficulties foreign students have in the area of turn taking we found in an earlier study that foreign students have problems in utilizing appropriate bidding techniques and understanding the rules of timing their utterances in order to avoid interrupting others In addition, they frequently fail to respond quickly enough to nominations, insert inappropriately long intrasentential pauses or take inappropriately long turns

5 **Cooperative solution building** All of the professors stressed that case analysis is an exercise in using the opinions of various members of the group to reach a desirable solution to a business problem It is important to note that there are various possible solutions to each problem Skills required for this critical area of the case discussion include listening critically to others, being able to incorporate others' ideas into one s own analysis and conversely, taking parts of one s analysis and fitting it into the general solution Linking one s statements to other speakers through smooth transitions or specific references to previous statements is also desirable Finally, even the most masterful analysis prepared by an individual

student may have to be abandoned in favor of another path chosen by the group The successful participant must be able to recognize if and/or how well his analysis fits the general trend if it does not he must exhibit flexibility in thinking on his feet and bringing his comments in line with the solution to the problem chosen by the group

C. **Variations in professors' styles**

Having observed five different professors in action it seems that teacher personality and individual style can be important factors in determining the approach taken to the case discussion Making students aware of possible areas of variation could help to facilitate the process of understanding expectations and fitting appropriate behavior to the situation whatever it may be The major areas of variation are

First the professor's method of allocating turns--ranging from nominating students who bid to cold-calling and differing in the degree to which student-student interaction is encouraged

Second the amount of pressure the professor puts on students to prepare beforehand and perform once in class and the degree to which the atmosphere is one of testing as opposed to informal discussion;

Third the teacher's approach which can range from traditional question-answer sequences interspersed with lecurettes to story-telling or role-playing

Fourth the amount of emphasis placed by the teacher on class participation and the degree to which it actually plays a role in the final grade

Fifth The quality of students' contributions whether students are expected to draw more heavily upon theory and facts of the case or are allowed to speculate or rely on their own opinion

Application of Research Findings for Curriculum Design

This description of the case discussion as a speech event along with the identification of skills and abilities needed for successful participation will serve as a very useful resource in designing a unit of study for the coming summer program Several possible areas of emphasis are being considered for inclusion in the course They are

1. critical reading of the case in order to isolate important facts and to relate them to broader implications.
2. exercises to give students practice in summarizing giving a concise synthesis of problems and possible solutions.
3. clarification exercises which develop precision and specificity in language use.
4. regular attention to vocabulary development and use of terminology found in the cases themselves.
5. practice in bidding for and holding the floor, turn taking, and timing of utterances.
6. "hot-seat" activities which require students to justify their responses through multiple follow-up questions posed by fellow students and the teacher.
7. the analysis of teachers' styles and patterns of student participation using videotaped case discussions.
8. activities which target receptive skills such as recognizing cues professors use to indicate how, when, and in what detail to answer a question.
9. activities which target language-specific skills such as gambits for expressing opinion, agreeing, disagreeing, and criticizing diplomatically

Where the development of linguistic competence in preparation for graduate business studies was once the main focus, we have now expanded our program with the knowledge gained from this research to include an additional focus on norms of speaking and patterns of interaction appropriate for the case discussion

References

Hymes D (1986 [1972]) Models of the interaction of language and social life In Directions in Sociolinguistics J J Gumperz & D Hymes (eds) Oxford Basil Blackwell 35-71

Mehan H (1984) Language and schooling Sociology of Education 174-183